



discipline for young children

lesson 5

Responding to Misbehavior

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Discipline for Young Children

Lesson 5: Responding to Misbehavior

Sometimes parents are forced to take action despite all their efforts to prevent misbehavior. They may have tried changing the setting, using more “do’s” than “don’t’s,” checked on the child’s health needs, and still be faced with quarreling, misbehaving children.

Using effective discipline methods in response to misbehavior benefits both parent and child. The child learns to take responsibility for his own behavior and the parent keeps a warm relationship with him. Each method discussed here asks, “How can I help this child find a positive way of behaving without reinforcing the negative behavior?” Effective discipline methods help children learn and grow in harmony with one another.

Choose the method best suited to you and your child. What is effective for some parents and children may not be effective for others. Keep in mind, however, that if you want children to change, you must also be willing to change.

Divert Their Attention

Infants and toddlers are easily distracted. For example, the young child’s attention can be diverted from playing with your watch to playing with toy keys, or from pulling your hair to shaking a rattle. He quickly forgets about playing with your watch and pulling your hair.

Diverting the child’s attention from an activity you disapprove of to one you approve of is a challenge. If Laurie is attracted to an expensive lamp, divert her attention from the lamp with a bit of attention from you such as a game of peek-a boo. (Then remove the lamp from her sight and reach. Don’t tempt her).

Another way to divert or redirect the child is to simply take



his hand and guide him either away from misbehavior or toward what you want him to do. For example, suppose it is bedtime and he doesn’t want to go to bed. Simply take his hand and say, “Let’s go get your p.j.’s.”

Divert To A Positive Model

Calling attention to the good behavior of one child may cause a misbehaving child to take it as a reminder to change his behavior. Care needs to be taken, however, in not letting the positive comment about one child sound like it was meant to criticize the other.

Here are some examples:

“I like the way you’re sharing your toys with Judy. Sharing is hard to do.”

“Oh, Ann, I’m glad you’re turning the pages so gently so they don’t tear. Books can be enjoyed longer that way.”

Deliberately Ignore Provocations

An effective way to deal with misbehavior which is directed toward getting the parent’s attention is to ignore it. But first be sure that you are giving the child your attention when he is behaving well. Children need attention, but not for misbehavior. Sometimes children misbehave just to get attention, even when the attention is negative. Children want attention, and they will get it by misbehaving if that is the only way they can get it.

A good example of this is the four year old’s use of “bad words.” If Michael says a bad word and his mother acts shocked or laughs, you can be sure Michael will use bad words as often as possible. Imagine the sense of power it gives him to see his mother’s reaction! On the other hand, if mother calmly says, “We don’t use that word in this house,” and goes on about her business, Michael will soon stop saying the word. It’s no fun “taking a power trip” if there’s no one to take along with you.

Sometimes, however, other children reinforce the negative behavior by serving as the child’s “audience.” They may call attention to the misbehavior by saying, “Michael called me a bad name.” In this situation you can either ignore their comment or distract them to another activity. It may be necessary to say, “We’re not paying attention to what Michael is saying now.”

Ignoring misbehavior is also an effective way to deal with



bickering and fighting between brothers and sisters. Jealousy, the feeling that one child gets more love and attention than the other, is often the cause of such bickering. Children know that parents will come running when they fight and argue. Disagreements between children in the family can be ignored and worked out between the children unless a very young child is in danger of physical harm.

When father hears a disagreement, he should check to see that the child is not likely to be hurt and then calmly go about his business. It is usually difficult, however, to keep from being drawn into the quarrel if the children can see you. You may need to go into your room and shut the door, or go into the bathroom and turn the water on so that the children know you can't hear them. If parents fail to come running when a disagreement occurs, one of the children will probably come running to them. "Beth won't let me play with the ball!" Or "Brian hit me and I didn't do anything to him!" The child is trying to get the parent to take sides and scold or punish the other child. Father can calmly say, "It's sad you're having trouble, but I'm sure you can work it out yourselves."

Children need to learn not to fight and argue, but settling their conflicts for them is not the way to teach them. It may stop the fighting for the moment, but it doesn't stop the next fight or teach children a better way to settle arguments. This kind of teaching is better done during peaceful moments in a friendly way. Encourage children to express their feelings in words rather than action when they have disagreements. Jeff can be encouraged not to hit Andy, and to tell him, "I don't like it when you grab the ball away from me."

Parents who get involved in their children's fights can never be sure they are settling the fight fairly. Even if they see Jeff hit David first, they may not realize that Jeff is getting back at David for pinching him yesterday when the parents weren't looking.

When parents hover, protect, and try to settle their children's arguments, they are depriving the children of a chance to

learn to get along with others. Try letting the children settle their own quarrels for a month. You will be surprised to find that they are having fewer quarrels and fights and are getting along together much better. You will notice a friendlier, happier atmosphere in your home, and you will have rid yourself of a disagreeable job.

State Consequences Firmly

One effective discipline method, often overlooked because it is so simple, is being firm. Have you ever wondered why a child does what one parent tells him to do, but doesn't do what the other tells him to do?

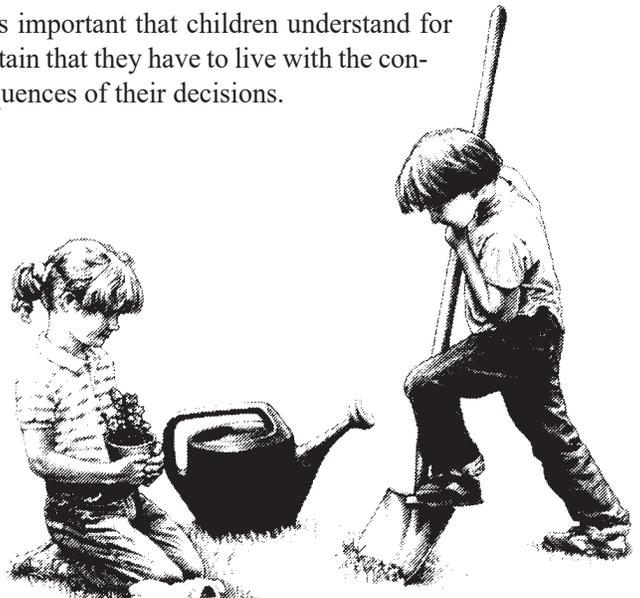
When parents are clear and firm about what is requested, children usually do it. Instead of saying in a wishy-washy tone of voice, "Don't you think it's time to wash your hands for dinner?" say, "It's time to wash your hands for dinner."

Your tone of voice, your words, and your actions must show that you mean what you say.

Being firm works for any age child and almost any problem. Children comply with requests when they know their parents mean business. Children know that parents mean business about playing in the street, going to school everyday, and staying off the roof. They also know when parents don't mean business.

Betsy's mother had trouble getting her to go to bed at night. She tried reasoning and cutting out TV, but nothing worked. Betsy just wouldn't go to bed at a reasonable hour. She even slept through dinner because she didn't get enough sleep the night before. The solution was found in the firm use of logical consequences: Betsy was free to decide on her bedtime but there would be no more sleeping after school or missed dinners.

It is important that children understand for certain that they have to live with the consequences of their decisions.



Don't Let The Situation Get Out Of Hand

Dealing with a situation before the parent becomes frustrated and angry can prevent behavior problems. Parents need to be aware of how they are feeling as well as how the child feels. One father said, "My four year old demands a lot of attention and I was trying to give it pleasantly at times when I was really busy or tired. Consequently I wound up frustrated." Parents can learn to recognize the symptoms within themselves and realize when they are getting "uptight." Then they can tell the child how they feel. For example, father can say, "Ed, I have a headache and that noise really bothers me." Then Ed will probably be quieter or go play elsewhere. This works better than if father waits until he explodes and says, "Get out of here! You are giving me a headache!"

Be Detached

Most parents, sooner or later, are very upset by their children's misbehavior. They get angry and lose their tempers. Rare indeed is the parent who always stays "cool."

When parents are upset, however, they cannot discipline the child wisely. People can't think straight when they are angry. They do things and say things which later—when they have calmed down—they wish they hadn't said and done. When parents are upset, they aren't likely to choose the wisest way to discipline the child.

Parents get very upset about their children's behavior because they love them, and because they are so close to them. They take the child's misbehavior personally and worry about "what the neighbors will think" rather than thinking about what they can do to help the child learn to behave in a more acceptable way.

For example, parents get upset when their child "sasses" them, but they don't get upset when the child next door does the same thing. They don't like it, but it doesn't upset them. And that is the key to this discipline method.

How To Be Detached

If your child does something that usually makes you mad, imagine that your child is your neighbor's child or your niece or nephew. If your neighbor's child or your nephew hit his little sister, what would you do? How would you handle it? That is what you should do when your five-year-old hits his little sister. That is being impersonal and detached.

Another way to be detached is to imagine that you are your child's aunt or uncle or day care teacher. Suppose your child kicked you and said, "I hate you. You're mean!" Imagine you are the child's day care teacher. How would she handle

the situation? That is how you should handle it.

Being detached works. It is really amazing to see the improvement in a child's behavior when parents try this discipline method.

Renewal time is not a punishment. It is simply a time for the inner self to become renewed and the child to regain his sense of personal control.



Provide Renewal Time

Renewal time or "time-out" is an excellent discipline method to use when your kids are "bugging" you. It works like this. Sandra and Sarah are fighting over a game. Mother says, "That kind of behavior is not allowed in this room. Sandra, I want you to go sit in that chair and Sarah, you go sit at the kitchen table for some renewal time until you feel more relaxed."

Renewal Time Has Many Advantages

Renewal time can be used with children aged three to twelve. (It probably won't work with children younger than three and it is not appropriate for teenagers.) Renewal time can be used with one child or two or three or as many children as you have places where they can be alone.

Renewal time can be used when children are fighting and quarreling, and when their behavior is annoying you.

Before trying this new method, sit down and explain it to your children when both you and the children are in a happy frame of mind. It always helps when children know what to expect. For example, tell the children, "The next time you argue over your toys, we are going to try something new. It's called renewal time. When I say, 'It's renewal time,' it means you have to go to separate rooms and stay for five minutes. It will give you time to renew your feelings and get back your sense of personal control." Explain that after renewal time, everyone just starts over.

Call Renewal Time In A Calm, Cool Way

It will not work if you make renewal time a punishment or if you scream, "Ken, I've told you and Lauren a hundred times not to fight over your toys. You two will just have to take a timeout and see how you like it!"

The objective of the renewal time is to stop undesirable behavior. Ken and Lauren cannot fight when they are in separate rooms. The renewal time gives them a chance to regain their composure. It gives them time to straighten out mixed-up feelings and ease inner tension.

Renewal time is particularly helpful for fighting and quarreling between brothers and sisters. Sometimes children fight to get attention. When parents scream and punish, they are giving their attention and thus giving their children reason to repeat their fighting.

Here are some ways to provide renewal time:

“Being alone for a little while.”

“Playing quietly over here.”

“John, come over to me right now. I’d like you to sit over here and read quietly for awhile until you feel better.” (When John seems relaxed, Mom suggests that he go play.)

“Betty, Paul feels bad when you hit him. You look like you’re very excited. I want you to come over here and help me wash these bowls. It will help you feel better.” (Mom has given Betty an opportunity to calm down.)

The first time you try renewal time the children will be surprised that you are not punishing them. After they are familiar with this discipline method, they will accept it and may even call renewal time themselves.

Reverse Renewal Time

Instead of isolating the child, it is the parent who is isolated. Reverse renewal time can be used when the child is really “bugging” you. Remove yourself from the situation. You may not be able to change the child’s behavior, but you do not have to suffer through it.

If the child is acting silly, arguing, or whining, leave the child and go where he can’t get to you. For example, take a magazine, go in the bathroom, and lock the door. Don’t come out until peace and calm are restored.

Some parents may not like this discipline method. It is inconvenient, and they interpret it as “giving in.” However, the children consider your presence rewarding. When you remove your presence, you are withholding a reward. Children soon learn that if they behave a certain way, mother or father will leave the room.

The Future

Now that you have learned some helpful ways to discipline your children, you can face the future with confidence. You alone can choose the best way to discipline your child because you know your child better than anyone else. When you choose the discipline methods described in these lessons you will be helping your child, and both you and your child will be happy with the results.

Responding to Misbehavior

To Discipline Effectively, Think About These Ideas:

1. Using effective discipline methods to respond to misbehavior helps the child learn self-control and helps create a happy atmosphere at home.
2. Divert the child’s attention from something you don’t want him to do or use positive models to change behavior.
3. Let children settle their own arguments unless there is danger of one of them being hurt.
4. Be firm about behavior you feel strongly about.
5. Be detached. Imagine you are your child’s aunt or uncle.
6. Keep children so busy making choices and knowing for certain that they have to live with those choices that they don’t have time to “put their moves on you.”
7. Using renewal time instead of punishing makes for a happier atmosphere in the home.
8. A “reverse renewal time” means that the parent is isolated from the child instead of the child being isolated from the parent.

See How Much You Have Learned!

Which discipline method would be appropriate in the following situations? Place a check in the proper column.

	Divert	Renewal Time	Ignore	Firmly State Consequences
1. Jimmy, four, wants to play with his six-year-old brother's tool set, but Brian won't let him and they argue.	_____	_____	_____	_____
2. Terry, 18 months old, is fascinated by the building blocks his sister is working on. You know a howl is coming if Terry knocks down the building.	_____	_____	_____	_____
3. Tonya, a six-year-old, has a reading assignment but is watching TV instead.	_____	_____	_____	_____
4. Todd keeps pestering his mother for a cookie. Mother knows lunch will be ready in an hour, so she tells Todd he will have to wait until after lunch. Todd continues to beg and argue.	_____	_____	_____	_____
5. Five-year-old Larry is playing with his favorite red fire truck when Julie, who is three, rudely snatches it away from him. Larry is furious and tries to take the fire truck away from Julie. Their quarreling is "bugging" you.	_____	_____	_____	_____

Practice Exercises

1. Count the number of times your children quarrel and fight with each other for three days. Write down what you did and what happened.

	Number of Fights	What You Did	What Happened
1st Day			
2nd Day			
3rd Day			

2. Try using renewal time when your children fight or argue this week.

Notice:

(a) How did I feel?

(b) How did the children respond?

3. Choose one behavior problem and "take action."

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A Record of My Discipline Practices and Their Effects*

Complete one week after studying Lesson 5.

Check the blanks that apply to you.

1. The way I usually discipline:

_____ Yell and scream

_____ Isolate

_____ Explain reasons calmly

_____ Spank

_____ Remove privileges

_____ Let the child experience the consequences

_____ Give choices

_____ Threaten, but don't follow through

_____ Show disapproval

_____ Distract

_____ Ignore misbehavior

_____ Scold

More

Less

About the same

2. During the past week, I:

Acted calmly

Acted firmly and kindly

Used kind words, not unkind words

Gave choices and let the child learn from the consequences

More

Less

About the same

3. The atmosphere in our home has changed to one of:

Friendliness

Cooperation

Understanding

Confusion

Fun

Hostility

Tension

*Adapted from Practical Education for Parenting by Kent G. Hamdorf, Extension Specialist, Human Relations Family Development, Ohio Cooperative Extension Service, 1978.